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Can You Say...Hero?

Fred Rogers has been doing the same small good thing for a very long time...

By [Tom Junod](#) PUBLISHED: APR 6, 2017



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This article was originally published in the November 1998 issue.

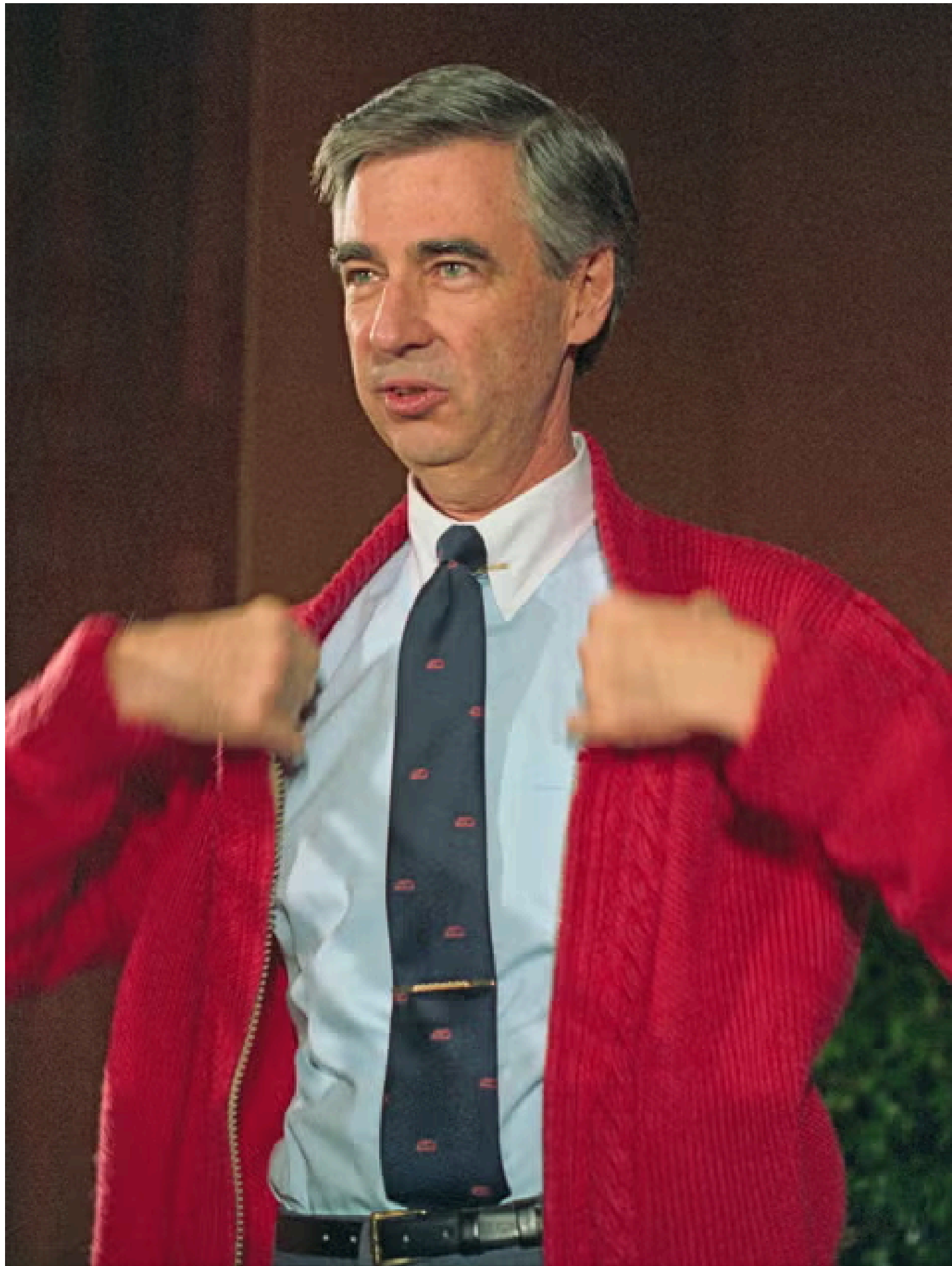
Once upon a time, a little boy loved a stuffed animal whose name was Old Rabbit. It was so old, in fact, that it was really an unstuffed animal; so old that even back then, with the little boy's brain still nice and fresh, he had no memory of it as "Young Rabbit," or even "Rabbit"; so old that Old Rabbit was barely a rabbit at all but rather a greasy hunk of skin without eyes and ears, with a single red stitch where its tongue used to be. The little boy didn't know why he loved Old Rabbit; he just did, and the night he threw it out the car window was the night he learned how to pray. He would grow up to become a great prayer, this little boy, but only intermittently, only fitfully, praying only when fear and desperation drove him to it, and the night he threw Old Rabbit into the darkness was the night that set the pattern, the night that taught him how. He prayed for Old Rabbit's safe return, and when, hours later, his mother and father came home with the filthy, precious strip of rabbity roadkill, he learned not only that prayers are sometimes answered but also the kind of severe effort they entail, the kind of endless frantic summoning. And so when he threw Old Rabbit out the car window the *next time*, it was gone for good.

You were a child once, too. That's what Mister Rogers said, that's what he wrote down, once upon a time, for the doctors. The doctors were ophthalmologists. An ophthalmologist is a doctor who takes care of the eyes. Sometimes, ophthalmologists have to take care of the eyes of children, and some children get very scared, because children know that their world disappears when their eyes close, and they can be afraid that the ophthalmologists will make their eyes close forever. The ophthalmologists did not want to scare children, so they asked Mister Rogers for help, and Mister Rogers agreed to write a chapter for a book the ophthalmologists were putting together—a

chapter about what other ophthalmologists could do to calm the children who came to their offices. Because Mister Rogers is such a busy man, however, he could not write the chapter himself, and he asked a woman who worked for him to write it instead. She worked very hard at writing the chapter, until one day she showed what she had written to Mister Rogers, who read it and crossed it all out and wrote a sentence addressed directly to the doctors who would be reading it:

"You were a child once, too."

And that's how the chapter began.



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The old navy-blue sport jacket comes off first, then the dress shoes, except that now there is not the famous sweater or the famous sneakers to replace them, and so after the shoes he's on to the dark socks, peeling them off and showing the blanched skin of his narrow feet. The tie is next, the scanty black batwing of a bow tie hand-tied at his slender throat, and then the shirt, always white or light blue, whisked from his body button by button. He wears an undershirt, of course, but no matter—soon that's gone, too, as is the belt, as are the beige trousers, until his undershorts stand as the last impediment to his nakedness. They are boxers, egg-colored, and to rid himself of them he bends at the waist, and stands on one leg, and hops, and lifts one knee toward his chest and then the other and then... Mister Rogers has no clothes on.

Nearly every morning of his life, Mister Rogers has gone swimming, and now, here he is, standing in a locker room, seventy years old and as white as the Easter Bunny, rimed with frost wherever he has hair, gnawed pink in the spots where his dry skin has gone to flaking, slightly wattled at the neck, slightly stooped at the shoulder, slightly sunken in the chest, slightly curvy at the hips, slightly pigeoned at the toes, slightly aswing at the fine bobbing nest of himself... and yet when he speaks, it is in that voice, his voice, the famous one, the unmistakable one, the televised one, the voice dressed in sweater and sneakers, the soft one, the reassuring one, the curious and expository one, the sly voice that sounds adult to the ears of children and childish to the ears of adults, and what he says, in the midst of all his bobbing nudity, is as understated as it is obvious: "Well, Tom, I guess you've already gotten a deeper glimpse into my daily routine than most people have."

Once upon a time, a long time ago, a man took off his jacket and put on a sweater. Then he took off his shoes and put on a pair of sneakers. His name was Fred Rogers. He was starting a television program, aimed at children, called *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. He had been on television before, but only as the voices and movements of puppets, on a program called *The Children's Corner*. Now he was stepping in front of the camera as Mister Rogers, and he wanted to do things right, and whatever he did right, he wanted to repeat. And so, once upon a time, Fred Rogers took off his jacket and put on a sweater his mother had made him, a cardigan with a zipper. Then he took off his shoes and put on a pair of navy-blue canvas boating sneakers. He did the same thing the next day, and then the next...until he had done the same things, those things, 865 times, at the beginning of 865 television programs, over a span of thirty-one years. The first time I met Mister Rogers, he told me a story of how deeply his simple gestures had been felt, and received. He had just come back from visiting Koko, the gorilla who has learned—or who has been taught—American Sign Language. Koko watches television. Koko watches *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and when Mister Rogers, in his sweater and sneakers, entered the place where she lives, Koko immediately folded him in her long, black arms, as though he were a child, and then ... "She took my shoes off, Tom," Mister Rogers said.



You were a child once, too. That's what Mister Rogers said, that's what he wrote down, once upon a time.

Koko was much bigger than Mister Rogers. She weighed 280 pounds, and Mister Rogers weighed 143. Koko weighed 280 pounds because she is a gorilla, and Mister Rogers weighed 143 pounds because he has weighed 143 pounds as long as he has been Mister Rogers, because once upon a time, around thirty-one years ago, Mister Rogers stepped on a scale, and the scale told him that Mister Rogers weighs 143 pounds. No, not that he *weighed* 143 pounds, but that he *weighs* 143 pounds.... And so, every day, Mister Rogers refuses to do anything that would make his weight change—he neither drinks, nor smokes, nor eats flesh of any kind, nor goes to bed late at night, nor sleeps late in the morning, nor even watches television—and every morning, when he swims, he steps on a scale in his bathing suit and his bathing cap and his goggles, and the scale tells him that he weighs 143 pounds. This has happened so many times that Mister Rogers has come to see that number as a gift, as a destiny fulfilled, because, as he says, "the number 143 means 'I love

you.' It takes one letter to say 'I' and four letters to say 'love' and three letters to say 'you.' One hundred and forty-three. 'I love you.' Isn't that wonderful?"



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The first time I called Mister Rogers on the telephone, I woke him up from his nap. He takes a nap every day in the late afternoon—just as he wakes up every morning at five-thirty to read and study and write and pray for the legions who have requested his prayers; just as he goes to bed at nine-thirty at night and sleeps eight hours without interruption. On this afternoon, the end of a hot, yellow day in New York City, he was very tired, and when I asked if I could go to his apartment and see him, he paused for a moment and said shyly, "Well, Tom, I'm in my bathrobe, if you don't mind." I told him I didn't mind, and when, five minutes later, I took the elevator to his

floor, well, sure enough, there was Mister Rogers, silver-haired, standing in the golden door at the end of the hallway and wearing eyeglasses and suede moccasins with rawhide laces and a flimsy old blue-and-yellow bathrobe that revealed whatever part of his skinny white calves his dark-blue dress socks didn't hide. "Welcome, Tom," he said with a slight bow, and bade me follow him inside, where he lay down—no, *stretched out*, as though he had known me all his life—on a couch upholstered with gold velveteen. He rested his head on a small pillow and kept his eyes closed while he explained that he had bought the apartment thirty years before for \$11,000 and kept it for whenever he came to New York on business for the Neighborhood. I sat in an old armchair and looked around. The place was drab and dim, with the smell of stalled air and a stain of daguerreotype sunlight on its closed, slatted blinds, and Mister Rogers looked so at home in its gloomy familiarity that I thought he was going to fall back asleep when suddenly the phone rang, startling him. "Oh, hello, my dear," he said when he picked it up, and then he said that he had a visitor, someone who wanted to learn more about the Neighborhood. "Would you like to speak to him?" he asked, and then handed me the phone. "It's Joanne," he said. I took the phone and spoke to a woman—his wife, the mother of his two sons—whose voice was hearty and almost whooping in its forthrightness and who spoke to me as though she had known me for a long time and was making the effort to keep up the acquaintance. When I handed him back the phone, he said, "Bye, my dear," and hung up and curled on the couch like a cat, with his bare calves swirled underneath him and one of his hands gripping his ankle, so that he looked as languorous as an odalisque. There was an energy to him, however, a fearlessness, an unashamed insistence on intimacy, and though I tried to ask him questions about himself, he always turned the questions back on me, and when I finally got him to talk about the puppets that

were the comfort of his lonely boyhood, he looked at me, his gray-blue eyes at once mild and steady, and asked,

"What about you, Tom? Did you have any special friends growing up?"

"Special friends?"

"Yes," he said.

"Maybe a puppet, or a special toy, or maybe just a stuffed animal you loved very much. Did you have a special friend like that, Tom?"

"Yes, Mister Rogers."

"Did your special friend have a name, Tom?"

"Yes, Mister Rogers. His name was Old Rabbit."

"Old Rabbit. Oh, and I'll bet the two of you were together since he was a very young rabbit. Would you like to tell me about Old Rabbit, Tom?"

And it was just about then, when I was spilling the beans about my special friend, that Mister Rogers rose from his corner of the couch and stood suddenly in front of me with a small black camera in hand. "Can I take your picture, Tom?" he asked. "I'd like to take your picture. I like to take pictures of all my new friends, so that I can show them to Joanne...." And then, in the dark room, there was a wallop of white light, and Mister Rogers disappeared behind it.



CBS Photo Archive // Getty Images

Once upon a time, there was a boy who didn't like himself very much. It was not his fault. He was born with cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy is something that happens to the brain. It means that you can think but sometimes can't walk, or even talk. This boy had a very bad case of cerebral palsy, and when he was still a little boy, some of the people entrusted to take care of him took advantage of him instead and did things to him that made him think that he was a very bad little boy, because only a bad little boy would have to live with the things he had to live with. In fact, when the little boy grew up to be

a teenager, he would get so mad at himself that he would hit himself, hard, with his own fists and tell his mother, on the computer he used for a mouth, that he didn't want to live anymore, for he was sure that God didn't like what was inside him any more than he did. He had always loved Mister Rogers, though, and now, even when he was fourteen years old, he watched the Neighborhood whenever it was on, and the boy's mother sometimes thought that Mister Rogers was keeping her son alive. She and the boy lived together in a city in California, and although she wanted very much for her son to meet Mister Rogers, she knew that he was far too disabled to travel all the way to Pittsburgh, so she figured he would never meet his hero, until one day she learned through a special foundation designed to help children like her son that Mister Rogers was coming to California and that after he visited the gorilla named Koko, he was coming to meet her son.



There was an energy to him, however, a fearlessness, an unashamed insistence on intimacy.

At first, the boy was made very nervous by the thought that Mister Rogers was visiting him. He was so nervous, in fact, that when Mister Rogers did visit, he got mad at himself and began hating himself and hitting himself, and his mother had to take him to another room and talk to him. Mister Rogers didn't leave, though. He wanted something from the boy, and Mister Rogers never leaves when he wants something from somebody. He just waited patiently, and when the boy came back, Mister Rogers talked to him, and then he made his request. He said, "I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?" On his computer, the boy answered yes, of course, he would do *anything* for Mister Rogers, so then Mister Rogers said, "I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?" And now the boy didn't know how to respond. He was thunderstruck. Thunderstruck means that you can't talk, because something has happened that's as sudden and as miraculous and maybe as scary as a bolt of lightning, and all you can do is listen to the rumble. The boy was thunderstruck because nobody had ever *asked* him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed *for*. The boy had always been the *object* of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers, and although at first he didn't know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he'd try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn't talk about

wanting to die anymore, because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean God likes him, too.

As for Mister Rogers himself...well, he doesn't look at the story in the same way that the boy did or that I did. In fact, when Mister Rogers first told me the story, I complimented him on being so smart—for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself—and Mister Rogers responded by looking at me at first with puzzlement and then with surprise. "Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask him for his prayers for *him*; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his *intercession*."



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On December 1, 1997—oh, heck, once upon a time—a boy, no longer little, told his friends to watch out, that he was going to do something "really big" the next day at school, and the next day at school he took his gun and his ammo and his earplugs and shot eight classmates who had clustered for a prayer meeting. Three died, and they were still children, almost. The shootings took place in West Paducah, Kentucky, and when Mister Rogers heard about them, he said, "Oh, wouldn't the world be a different place if he had said, 'I'm going to do something really *little* tomorrow,'" and he decided to dedicate a week of the Neighborhood to the theme "Little and Big." He wanted to tell children that what starts out little can sometimes *become* big, and so that could devote themselves to little dreams without feeling bad about them. But how could Mister Rogers *show* little becoming big, and vice versa? That was a challenge. He couldn't just say it, the way he could always just say to the children who watch his program that they are special to him, or even sing it, the way he would always sing "It's You I Like" and "Everybody's Fancy" and "It's Such a Good Feeling" and "Many Ways to Say I Love You" and "Sometimes

People Are Good." No, he had to show it, he had to demonstrate it, and that's how Mister Rogers and the people who work for him eventually got the idea of coming to New York City to visit a woman named Maya Lin.



Deborah Feingold // Getty Images

Maya Lin is a famous architect. Architects are people who create big things from the little designs they draw on pieces of paper. Most famous architects are famous for creating big famous buildings, but Maya Lin is more famous for creating big fancy things for people to look at, and in fact, when Mister Rogers had gone to her studio the day before, he looked at the pictures she had drawn of the clock that is now on the ceiling of a place in New York called Penn Station. A clock is a machine that tells people what time it is, but as Mister Rogers sat in the backseat of an old station wagon hired to take him from his apartment to Penn Station, he worried that Maya Lin's clock might be too fancy and that the children who watch the Neighborhood might not understand it. Mister Rogers always worries about things like that, because he always worries about children, and when his station wagon stopped in traffic next to a bus stop, he read aloud the advertisement of an airline trying to push its international service. "Hmmm," Mister Rogers said, "*that's* a strange ad. 'Most people think of us as a great domestic airline. We *hate* that.' Hmmm. *Hate* is such a strong word to use so lightly. If they can hate something like that, you wonder how easy it would be for them to hate something more important." He was with his producer, Margy Whitmer. He had makeup on his face and a dollop of black dye combed into his silver hair. He was wearing beige pants, a blue dress shirt, a tie, dark socks, a pair of dark-blue boating sneakers, and a purple, zippered cardigan. He looked very little in the backseat of the car. Then the car stopped on Thirty-fourth Street, in front of the escalators leading down to the station, and when the doors opened—"Holy shit! It's Mister Fucking Rogers!"—he turned into Mister Fucking Rogers. This was not a bad thing, however, because he was in New York, and in New York it's not an insult to be called Mister Fucking Anything. In fact, it's an honorific. An honorific is what people call you when they respect you, and the moment Mister Rogers got out of the

car, people wouldn't stay the fuck away from him, they respected him so much. Oh, Margy Whitmer tried to keep people away from him, tried to tell people that if they gave her their names and addresses, Mister Rogers would send them an autographed picture, but every time she turned around, there was Mister Rogers putting his arms around someone, or wiping the tears off someone's cheek, or passing around the picture of someone's child, or getting on his knees to talk to a child. Margy couldn't stop them, and she couldn't stop him. "Oh, Mister Rogers, thank you for my childhood." "Oh, Mister Rogers, you're the father I never had." "Oh, Mister Rogers, would you please just hug me?" After a while, Margy just rolled her eyes and gave up, because it's always like this with Mister Rogers, because the thing that people don't understand about him is that he's *greedy* for this—greedy for the grace that people offer him. What is grace? He doesn't even know. He can't define it. This is a man who loves the simplifying force of definitions, and yet all he knows of grace is how he gets it; all he knows is that he gets it from God, through man. And so in Penn Station, where he was surrounded by men and women and children, he had this *power*, like a comic-book superhero who absorbs the energy of others until he bursts out of his shirt.



He wanted to tell children that what starts out little can sometimes *become* big, and so that could devote themselves to little dreams without feeling bad about them.

"If Mister Fucking Rogers can tell me how to read that fucking clock, I'll watch his show every day for a fucking *year*"—that's what someone in the crowd said while watching Mister Rogers and Maya Lin crane their necks at Maya Lin's big fancy clock, but it didn't even matter whether Mister Rogers could read the clock or not, because every time he looked at it, with the television cameras on him, he leaned back from his waist and opened his mouth wide with astonishment, like someone trying to catch a peanut he had tossed into the air, until it became clear that Mister Rogers could show that he was astonished all *day* if he had to, or even forever, because Mister Rogers lives in a *state* of astonishment, and the astonishment he showed when he looked at the clock was the same astonishment he showed when people—absolute strangers—walked up to him and fed his hungry ear with their whispers, and he turned to me, with an open, abashed mouth, and said, "Oh, Tom, if you could only hear the stories I hear!"

Once upon a time, Mister Rogers went to New York City and got caught in the rain. He didn't have an umbrella, and he couldn't find a taxi, either, so he ducked with a friend into the subway and got on one of the trains. It was late in the day, and the train was crowded with children who were going home from school. Though of all races, the schoolchildren were mostly black and Latino, and they didn't even approach Mister Rogers and ask him for his autograph. They just sang. They sang, all at once, all together, the song he sings at the start of his program, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" and turned the clattering train into a single soft, runaway choir.

He finds me, of course, at Penn Station. He finds me, because that's what Mister Rogers *does*—he looks, and then he finds. I'm standing against a wall, listening to a bunch of mooks from Long Island discuss the strange word—*cariz*—a foreign word—he has written down on each of the autographs he gave them. First mook: "He says it's the Greek word for grace." Second mook: "Huh. That's cool. I'm glad I know that. Now, what the fuck is grace?" First mook: "Looks like you're gonna have to break down and buy a dictionary." Second mook: "Fuck that. What I'm buying is a ticket to the fucking Lotto. I just met Mister Rogers—this is *definitely* my lucky day." I'm listening to these guys when, from thirty feet away, I notice Mister Rogers looking around for someone and know, immediately, that he is looking for me. He is on one knee in front of a little girl who is hoarding, in her arms, a small stuffed animal, sky-blue, a bunny.

"Remind you of anyone, Tom?" he says when I approach the two of them. He is not speaking of the little girl.

"Yes, Mister Rogers."

"Looks a bit like...*Old Rabbit*, doesn't it, Tom?"

"Yes, Mister Rogers."

"I thought so."

Then he turns back to the little girl. "This man's name is Tom. When he was your age, he had a rabbit, too, and he loved it very much. Its name was Old Rabbit. What is yours named?"

The little girl eyes me suspiciously, and then Mister Rogers. She goes a little knock-kneed, directs a thumb toward her mouth. "Bunny Wunny," she says.

"Oh, that's a nice name," Mister Rogers says, and then goes to the Thirty-fourth Street escalator to climb it one last time for the cameras. When he reaches the street, he looks right at the lens, as he always does, and says, speaking of the Neighborhood, "Let's go back to my place," and then makes a right turn toward Seventh Avenue, except that this time he just keeps going, and suddenly Margy Whitmer is saying, "Where is Fred? Where is Fred?" and Fred, he's a hundred yards away, in his sneakers and his purple sweater, and the only thing anyone sees of him is his gray head bobbing up and down amid all the other heads, the hundreds of them, the thousands, the millions, disappearing into the city and its swelter.



Everett Collection

Once upon a time, a little boy with a big sword went into battle against Mister Rogers. Or maybe, if the truth be told, Mister Rogers went into battle against a little boy with a big sword, for Mister Rogers didn't *like* the big sword. It was one of those swords that really isn't a sword at all; it was a big plastic contraption with lights and sound effects, and it was the kind of sword used in defense of the universe by the heroes of the television shows that the little boy liked to

watch. The little boy with the big sword did not watch Mister Rogers. In fact, the little boy with the big sword didn't know who Mister Rogers *was*, and so when Mister Rogers knelt down in front of him, the little boy with the big sword looked past him and through him, and when Mister Rogers said, "Oh, my, that's a big sword you have," the boy didn't answer, and finally his mother got embarrassed and said, "Oh, honey, c'mon, that's *Mister Rogers*," and felt his head for fever. Of course, she knew who Mister Rogers was, because she had grown up with him, and she knew that he was good for her son, and so now, with her little boy zombie-eyed under his blond bangs, she apologized, saying to Mister Rogers that she knew he was in a rush and that she knew he was here in Penn Station taping his program and that her son usually wasn't *like* this, he was probably just tired.... Except that Mister Rogers wasn't going anywhere. Yes, sure, he was taping, and right there, in Penn Station in New York City, were rings of other children wiggling in wait for him, but right now his patient gray eyes were fixed on the little boy with the big sword, and so he stayed there, on one knee, until the little boy's eyes finally focused on Mister Rogers, and he said, "It's not a sword; it's a death ray." A death ray! Oh, honey, Mommy *knew* you could do it....And so now, encouraged, Mommy said, "Do you want to give Mister Rogers a hug, honey?" But the boy was shaking his head no, and Mister Rogers was sneaking his face past the big sword and the armor of the little boy's eyes and whispering something in his ear—something that, while not changing his mind about the hug, made the little boy look at Mister Rogers in a new way, with the eyes of a child at last, and nod his head yes.

We were heading back to his apartment in a taxi when I asked him what he had said.

"Oh, I just knew that whenever you see a little boy carrying something like that, it means that he wants to show people that he's strong on the outside. I just wanted to let him know that he was strong on the inside, too. And so that's what I told him. I said, 'Do you know that you're strong on the inside, too?' Maybe it was something he needed to hear."



Mark Wilson // Getty Images

He was barely more than a boy himself when he learned what he would be fighting for, and fighting against, for the rest of his life. He was in college. He was a music major at a small school in Florida and planning to go to seminary upon graduation. His name was Fred Rogers. He came home to Latrobe, Pennsylvania, once upon a time, and his parents, because they were wealthy, had bought something new for the corner room of their big redbrick house. It was a television. Fred turned it on, and as he says now, with plaintive distaste, "there were people throwing *pies* at one another." He was the soft son of overprotective parents, but he believed, right then, that he was strong enough to enter into battle with *that*—that machine, that medium—and to wrestle with it until it yielded to him, until the ground touched by its blue shadow became hallowed and this thing called television came to be used "for the broadcasting of grace through the land." It would not be easy, no—for in order to win such a battle, he would have to forbid himself the privilege of stopping, and whatever he did right he would have to repeat, as though he were already living in eternity. And so it was that the puppets he employed on *The Children's Corner* would be the puppets he employed forty-four years later, and so it was that once

he took off his jacket and his shoes...well, he was Mister Rogers for good. And even now, when he is producing only three weeks' worth of new programs a year, he still winds up agonizing—*agonizing*—about whether to announce his theme as "Little and Big" or "Big and Little" and still makes only two edits per televised minute, because he doesn't want his message to be determined by the cuts and splices in a piece of tape—to become, despite all his fierce coherence, "a message of fragmentation."



Though of all races, the schoolchildren were mostly black and Latino, and they didn't even approach Mister Rogers and ask him for his autograph. They just sang.

He is losing, of course. The revolution he started—a half hour a day, five days a week—it wasn't enough, it didn't *spread*, and so, forced to fight his battles alone, Mister Rogers is losing, as we all are losing. He is losing to it, to *our* twenty-four-hour-a-day pie fight, to the dizzying cut and the disorienting edit, to the message of fragmentation, to the flicker and pulse and shudder and strobe, to the constant, hivey drone of the electroculture...and yet still he fights, deathly afraid that the medium he chose is consuming the very things he tried to protect: childhood and silence. Yes, at seventy years old and 143 pounds, Mister Rogers still fights, and indeed, early this year, when television handed him its highest honor, he responded by telling television—gently, of course—to just *shut up* for once, and television listened. He had already won his third Daytime Emmy, and now he went onstage to accept Emmy's Lifetime Achievement Award, and there, in front of all the soap-opera stars and talk-show sinceratrons, in front of all the jutting man-tanned jaws and jutting saltwater bosoms, he made his small bow and said into the microphone, "All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, *ten seconds* to think of the people who have helped you become who you are....Ten seconds of silence." And then he lifted his wrist, and looked at the audience, and looked at his watch, and said softly, "I'll watch the time," and there was, at first, a small whoop from the crowd, a giddy, strangled hiccup of laughter, as people realized that *he wasn't kidding*, that Mister Rogers was not some convenient eunuch but rather a *man*, an authority figure who actually expected them to do what he asked...and so they did. One second, two seconds, three seconds...and now the jaws clenched, and the bosoms heaved, and the mascara ran, and the tears fell upon the beglittered gathering like rain leaking down a crystal chandelier, and

Mister Rogers finally looked up from his watch and said, "May God be with you" to all his vanquished children.

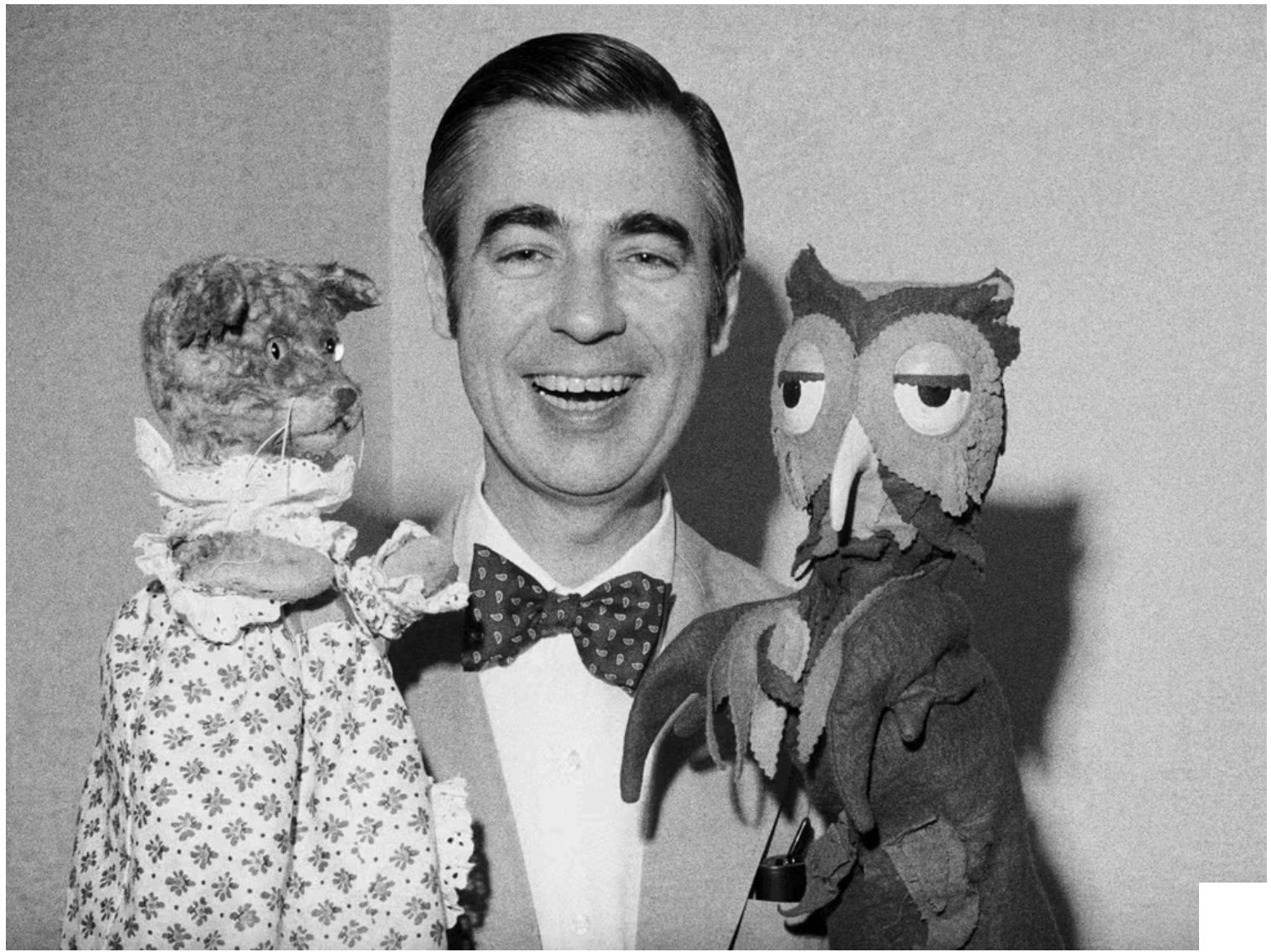
Once upon a time, there was a little boy born blind, and so, defenseless in the world, he suffered the abuses of the defenseless, and when he grew up and became a man, he looked back and realized that he'd had no childhood at all, and that if he were ever to have a childhood, he would have to start having it now, in his forties. So the first thing he did was rechristen himself "Joybubbles"; the second thing he did was declare himself five years old forever; and the third thing he did was make a pilgrimage to Pittsburgh, where the University of Pittsburgh's Information Sciences Library keeps a Mister Rogers archive. It has all 865 programs, in both color and black and white, and for two months this past spring, Joybubbles went to the library every day for ten hours and watched the Neighborhood's every episode, plus specials—or, since he is blind, *listened* to every episode, *imagined* every episode. Until one night, Mister Rogers came to him, in what he calls a visitation—"I was dreaming, but I was awake"—and offered to teach him how to pray.

"But Mister Rogers, I can't pray," Joybubbles said, "because every time I try to pray, I forget the words."

"I know that," Mister Rogers said, "and that's why the prayer I'm going to teach you has only three words."

"What prayer is that, Mister Rogers? What kind of prayer has only three words?"

"Thank you, God," Mister Rogers said.



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The walls of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood are light blue and fleeced with clouds. They are tall—as tall as the cinder-block walls they are designed to hide—and they encompass the Neighborhood's entire stage set, from the flimsy yellow house where Mister Rogers comes to visit, to the closet where he finds his sweaters, to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where he goes to dream. The blue walls are the ends of the daylit universe he has made, and yet Mister Rogers can't see them—or at least can't know them—because he was born blind to color. He doesn't know the color of his walls, and one day, when I caught him looking toward his painted skies, I asked him to tell me what color they *are*, and he said, "I imagine they're *blue*, Tom." Then he looked at me and smiled. "I imagine they're blue."



And yet still he fights, deathly afraid that the medium he chose is consuming the very things he tried to protect: childhood and silence.

He has spent thirty-one years imagining and reimagining those walls—the walls that have both penned him in and set him free. You would think it would be easy by now, being Mister Rogers; you would think that one morning he would wake up and think, Okay, all I have to do is be *nice* for my allotted half hour today, and then I'll just take the rest of the day off....But no, Mister Rogers is a stubborn man, and so on the day I ask about the color of his sky, he has already gotten up at five-thirty, already prayed for those who have asked for his prayers, already read, already written, already swum, already weighed himself, already sent out cards for the birthdays he never forgets, already called any number of people who depend on him for comfort, already cried when he read the letter of a mother whose child was buried with a picture of Mister Rogers in his casket, already played for twenty minutes with an autistic boy who has come, with his father, all the way from Boise, Idaho, to meet him. The boy had never spoken, until one day he said, "X the Owl," which is the name of one of Mister Rogers's puppets, and he had never looked his father in the eye until one day his father had said, "Let's go to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe," and now the boy is speaking and reading, and the father has come to thank Mister Rogers for saving his son's life....And by this time, well, it's nine-thirty in the morning, time for Mister Rogers to take off his jacket and his shoes and put on his sweater and his sneakers and start taping another visit to the Neighborhood. He writes all his own scripts, but on this day, when he

receives a visit from Mrs. McFeely and a springer spaniel, she says that she has to bring the dog "back to his owner," and Mister Rogers makes a face. The cameras stop, and he says, "I don't like the word owner there. It's not a good word. Let's change it to 'bring the dog *home*.'" And so the change is made, and the taping resumes, and this is how it goes all day, a life unfolding within a clasp of unfathomable governance, and once, when I lose sight of him, I ask Margy Whitmer where he is, and she says, "Right over your shoulder, where he always is," and when I turn around, Mister Rogers is facing me, child-stealthy, with a small black camera in his hand, to take another picture for the album that he will give me when I take my leave of him.

Yes, it should be easy being Mister Rogers, but when four o'clock rolls around, well, Mister Rogers is *tired*, and so he sneaks over to the piano and starts playing, with dexterous, pale fingers, the music that used to

end a 1940s newsreel and that has now become the music he plays to signal to the cast and crew that a day's taping has wrapped. On this day, however, he is premature by a considerable extent, and so Margy, who has been with Mister Rogers since 1983—because nobody who works for Mister Rogers ever *leaves* the Neighborhood—comes running over, papers in hand, and says, "Not so fast there, buster."

"Oh, please, sister," Mister Rogers says. "I'm done."

And now Margy comes up behind him and massages his shoulders. "No, you're not," she says. "Roy Rogers is done. Mister Rogers still has a ways to go."



NBC // Getty Images

He was a child, once, too, and so one day I asked him if I could go with him back to Latrobe. He thought about it for a second, then said, by way of agreement, "Okay, then—tomorrow, Tom, I'll show you childhood." Not *his* childhood, mind you, or even *a* childhood—no, just "childhood." And so the next morning, we swam together, and then he put on his boxer shorts and the dark socks,

and the T-shirt, and the gray trousers, and the belt, and then the white dress shirt and the black bow tie and the gray suit jacket, and about two hours later we were pulling up to the big brick house on Weldon Street in Latrobe, and Mister Rogers was thinking about going inside.

There was nobody home. The doors were open, unlocked, because the house was undergoing a renovation of some kind, but the owners were away, and Mister Rogers's boyhood home was empty of everyone but workmen. "Do you think we can go in?" he asked Bill Isler, president of Family Communications, the company that produces *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Bill had driven us there, and now, sitting behind the wheel of his red Grand Cherokee, he was full of remonstrance. "No!" he said. "Fred, they're *not home*. If we wanted to go into the house, we should have *called* first. Fred..." But Mister Rogers was out of the car, with his camera in his hand and his legs moving so fast that the material

of his gray suit pants furled and unfurled around both of his skinny legs, like flags exploding in a breeze. And here, as he made his way through thickets of bewildered workmen—this skinny old man dressed in a gray suit and a bow tie, with his hands on his hips and his arms akimbo, like a dance instructor—there was some kind of wiggly jazz in his legs, and he went flying all around the outside of the house, pointing at windows, saying there was the room where he learned to play the piano, and there was the room where he saw the pie fight on a primitive television, and there was the room where his beloved father died...until finally we reached the front door. He put his hand on the knob; he cracked it open, but then, with Bill Isler calling caution from the car, he said, "Maybe we *shouldn't* go in. And all the people who made this house special to me are not here, anyway. They're all in heaven."

New American Heroes: A Special Issue

Esquire

NOVEMBER 1998

MAN AT HIS BEST

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Batman
Congressman
John Lewis
Jenny Holzer
Frank Serpico
Lenny Skutnik
Oliver Stone
James Brown
Y.A. Tittle

and
a first look at
Terrence Malick's
war movie,
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And so we went to the graveyard. We were heading there all along, because Mister Rogers *loves* graveyards, and so as we took the long, straight road out of sad, fading Latrobe, you could still feel the *speed* in him, the hurry, as he mustered up a sad anticipation, and when we passed through the cemetery gates, he smiled as he said to Bill Isler, "The plot's at the end of the yellow-brick road." And so it was; the asphalt ended, and then we began bouncing over a road of old blond bricks, until even that road ended, and we were parked in front of the place where Mister Rogers is to be buried. He got out of the car, and, moving as quickly as he had moved to the door of his house, he stepped up a small hill to the door of a large gray mausoleum, a huge structure built for six, with a slightly peaked roof, and bronze doors, and angels living in the stained glass. He peeked in the window, and in the same voice he uses on television, *that* voice, at once so patient and so eager, he pointed out each crypt, saying "There's my father, and there's my mother, and there, on the left, is my place, and right across will be Joanne..." The window was of darkened glass, though, and so to see through it, we had to press our faces close against it, and where the glass had warped away from the frame of the door—where there was a finger-wide crack—Mister Rogers's voice leaked into his grave, and came back to us as a soft, hollow echo.

And then he was on the move again, happily, quickly, for he would not leave until he showed me all the places of all those who'd loved him into being. His grandfather, his grandmother, his uncles, his aunts, his father-in-law and mother-in-law, even his family's servants—he went to each grave, and spoke their names, and told their stories, until finally I headed back down to the Jeep and turned back around to see Mister Rogers standing high on a green dell, smiling among the stones. "And now if you don't mind," he said without a hint of shame or embarrassment, "I have to find a place to relieve myself," and then off he went, this ecstatic ascetic, to take a proud piss in his corner of heaven.

Once upon a time, a man named Fred Rogers decided that he wanted to live in heaven. Heaven is the place where good people go when they die, but this man, Fred Rogers, didn't want to *go* to heaven; he wanted to *live* in heaven, here, now, in this world, and so one day, when he was talking about all the people he had loved in this life, he looked at me and said, "The connections we make in the course of a life—maybe that's what heaven is, Tom. We make so *many* connections here on earth. Look at us—I've just met you, but I'm investing in who you are and who you will be, and I can't help it."



"Look at us—I've just met you, but I'm investing in who you are and who you will be, and I can't help it."

The next afternoon, I went to his office in Pittsburgh. He was sitting on a couch, under a framed rendering of the Greek word for grace and a biblical phrase written in Hebrew that means "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." A woman was with him, sitting in a big chair. Her name was Deb. She was very pretty. She had a long face and a dark blush to her skin. She had curls in her hair and stars at the centers of her eyes. She was a minister at Fred Rogers's church. She spent much of her time tending to the sick and the dying. Fred Rogers loved her very much, and so, out of nowhere, he smiled and put his hand over hers. "Will you be with me when I die?" he asked her, and when she said yes, he said, "Oh, thank you, my dear." Then, with his hand still over hers and his eyes looking straight into hers, he said, "Deb, do you know what a great prayer you are? Do you know that about yourself? Your prayers are just wonderful." Then he looked at me. I was sitting in a small chair by the door, and he said, "Tom, would you close the door, please?" I closed the door and sat back down. "Thanks, my dear," he said to me, then turned back to Deb. "Now, Deb, I'd like to ask you a favor," he said. "Would you lead us? Would you lead us in prayer?"



David Ake // Getty Images

Deb stiffened for a second, and she let out a breath, and her color got deeper. "Oh, I don't know, Fred," she said. "I don't know if I want to put on a *performance*...."

Fred never stopped looking at her or let go of her hand. "It's not a performance. It's just a meeting of friends," he said. He moved his hand from her wrist to her palm and extended his other hand to me. I took it and then put my hand around her free hand. His hand was warm, hers was cool, and we bowed our heads, and closed our eyes, and I heard Deb's voice calling out for the grace of God. What is grace? I'm not certain; all I know is that my heart felt like a spike, and then, in that room, it opened and felt like an umbrella. I had never prayed like that before, ever. I had always been a great prayer, a powerful one, but only fitfully, only out of guilt, only when fear and desperation drove me to

it...and it hit me, right then, with my eyes closed, that this was the moment Fred Rogers—Mister Rogers—had been leading me to from the moment he answered the door of his apartment in his bathrobe and asked me about Old Rabbit. Once upon a time, you see, I lost something, and prayed to get it back, but when I lost it the second time, I didn't, and now this was it, the missing word, the unuttered promise, the prayer I'd been waiting to say a very long time.

"Thank you, God," Mister Rogers said.

WATCH NEXT



